

Griffin Bell's Just One of the Boys Until

He did it for a friend.
He's leaving the country.

That's the short description of the case of Griffin Bell, the first attorney general in history to be cited for contempt of court. He's defying a federal judge's order to turn over FBI files in the Socialist Workers Party suit against the bureau. He's planning to go to Australia for a tour that he hopes will further enhance the very good relations that exist between the governments and people of Australia and New Zealand and the government and people of the U.S.

The judge, as he likes to be called, has been laboring ever since he took office to improve the relations between himself and the FBI. After months of groaning and wailing, he finally indicted three former officials. But he wants the boys in the bureau to understand from his new contempt citation that he will do anything for them — anything, that is, short of going to jail.

THE IMPLACABILITY of the Old

Guard being what it is, Bell's threats may be wasted. Doubtless they give him two cheers for his stubbornness about the sanctity of their files. But you can be sure that they are muttering already that if he were a real pal, he would take his men off a tin plate for a couple of months to prove his loyalty.

The judge is seeking what a Watergate principal was pleased to call a "definitive ruling" about his defiance of Judge Thomas Griesa's order to hand over 18 folders to the attorneys for the SWP. He demands that another tribunal, perhaps even the Supreme Court, make a judgment about his quasi-martyrdom. If he loses, he'll come across.

The usually gregarious Georgian did not present himself to the public on the notable occasion. His spokesman, Terrence Adamson, correct in pinstripes, met the press and answered their questions about how an attorney general could be in contempt and in Australia at the same time.

An "unseemly confrontation" Adamson termed the impasse between the nation's chief law enforcement officer and the federal judge.

He declined to answer queries about an equally "unseemly confrontation" that simultaneously occurred on the Bell-FBI front. The attorney general had at length ended his sulkerance of J. Wallace LaPrade, the assistant director of the New York office; he finally fired him by hand-delivered letter on the morning of the contempt citation.

LaPrade, who looks like a tango instructor and has shown no gratitude for the attorney general's forbearance, at once issued a blast claiming that his offense was exactly the same as Bell's — a refusal to divulge confidential information. He is a martyr, LaPrade claims.

Mary McGroarty

because he refused to discuss "national security" matters with Justice Department superiors. He was accompanied by Roy Cohn, who in his youth refused to answer questions at the Army-McCarthy hearings.

LAPRADE SHOULD HAVE been prosecuted for perjury, according to four young Justice Department FBI investigators, who quit in disgust because of Bell's interference.

According to their account, given to a Senate committee in April, the attorney general personally implored LaPrade to recant grand jury testimony, because otherwise he would have to be indicted for perjury, which would be "a disgrace to the FBI."

Additionally, the four lawyers

charged, LaPrade had concealed information about the alleged FBI 1974 break-ins from GAO investigators and had failed to come clean with the Church committee.

The attorney general's boundless devotion to the FBI was conveyed to them by the then head of the criminal division, Benjamin R. Civiletti, last December.

He told the whistle blowers that Bell had ruled there would be "no prosecutions of the FBI officials in the field office headquarters . . . of officials involved in the use of black-bag jobs, no prosecutions of officials for wiretapping or mail opening discovered during the investigation, no

prosecutions for perjury committed during the course of the investigation for false representations to the GAO, or for the Church committee cover-up."

WHENEVER HE IS asked about his curious protective judgments, Bell says, "I've got to run the bureau."

He is willing to let the impression get around that the bureau is running him. He is equally willing, obviously, to let the impression grow that he is above the law.

Previously, his most controversial double-standard decision was his acquiescence in the plea bargaining of former CIA Director Richard Helms, who called his guilty verdict "a badge of honor." Maybe Bell regards his contempt citation in the same light.

Judge Griesa has a different view. He took note, in his decision, of President Carter's recent celebrated complaint "about delays in litigation occasioned by litigants who have the power and resources to grant obstructions."

Judge Griesa, who seems to have little appreciation of the importance of FBI morale and even less of Griffin Bell's, said:

"In the judgment of this court, the attorney general's actions in this case are virtually a classic example of this problem."

Time to Go to jail